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Heuglin's Gull *Larus heuglini* on Wetar Island, Banda Sea: the first Indonesian record

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Gulls are a not a regular feature of the avifauna of insular South-East Asia. Five species have been recorded in Indonesia (Sukmantoro *et al.* 2007, Marc Gardner pers. comm. 2009). Only one, the Common Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*, has been recorded from Wallacea, with several records in northern Sulawesi since 1986 (White & Bruce 1986, Coates & Bishop 1997). The other species are likely to occur as vagrants during the Palaearctic winter. H. Kuhn observed a gull on Wetar Island during a September–October 1902 visit, but did not collect a specimen (Hartert 1904). It was speculated that Kuhn had probably seen Common Black-headed Gull (Bruce 1987). Remarkably, this is the only published gull record for the Lesser Sundas (covering the islands from Lombok in the west through to the Tanimbar archipelago).

During a 45-day survey (26 September to 9 November 2008) of the north and west of Wetar, Maluku province in the Banda Sea, we visited (on 12 occasions) a small estuary on 'Sungai Besar', about 400 m east of Lurang village (7°40'36"S 126°20'35"E) (see Trainor *et al.* 2009). Although the estuary is small, with c.2–3 ha of mangrove, lagoons, river mouth and stones and cobble, it supported a regionally rich array of Palearctic migrant shorebirds (18 species) including five species that are rare to uncommon in the Nusa Tenggara and Maluku regions (White 1975, White & Bruce 1986, Trainor 2005): Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*, Oriental Plover *C. veredus*, Little Curlew *Numenius minutus*, Great Knot *Calidris tenuirostris* and Sanderling *C. alba*.

On 30 October 2008, a gull (see photo *BirdingASIA* 12, p.85, Plate 1) was observed to fly over our (CRT & Imanuddin) heads and land on rocks near the mouth of the estuary. At the time we were unable to identify it, but between 07h30 and 08h30 we took about 20 photographs down to 15 m from the bird, and these were later sent to several gull experts to assist with identification. The gull was silent and thirsty—it drank freshwater from the stream about 15 times. It flew off twice—after about 20 minutes, and again after 40 minutes of observation—and was not seen during two subsequent visits to the estuary on 31 October and 8 November.

Based on the bird's large size, bare part coloration (with pale yellow legs), and plumage (combining a dark grey adult-type 'saddle' with worn brown wing-coverts and tertials, and an unmarked white head), the gull appeared to be in third-year type plumage (Ruud Altenburg pers. comm.), and it was eventually identified as a Heuglin's Gull *Larus heuglini* (following Inskipp *et al.* 1996), here defined to include nominate *heuglini* and subspecies *barabensis* and *taimyrensis*. The plumage shown in Plate 1 in Trainor *et al.* (2009) is typical of immature faster-moulting large gulls, which include Heuglin's and also Mongolian Gull *L. mongolicus* (N. Moores pers. comm.). Heuglin's Gull is currently treated as a species by OBC (OBC 2009) but the IOC (http://www.worldbirdnames.org/names.html) include it with Lesser Black-backed Gull *L. fuscus* and BirdLife International include it with Herring Gull *L. argentatus* (BirdLife International 2010). Many gaps remain in our understanding of these (and other closely related) taxa, so its exact subspecific identity may remain unknown (Nial Moores pers. comm.).

Nominate Heuglin's Gull breeds in western Siberia, on the Kanin Peninsula and Pechora Delta of the eastern Arctic (Liebers *et al.* 2001); *taimyrensis* on the Taimyr peninsula (Brazil 2009); and *barabensis* in south-west Siberia to south-east Urals, Baraba and the Kulunda Plains (Olsen & Larsson 2003). Of the three, only *taimyrensis* is regular and locally numerous in East Asia. However, the saddle of the Wetar Island bird appears darker than typical *taimyrensis*, and both the white-headedness of a third-year bird and the bill shape

and coloration also appear unusual. In the Inner Gulf of Thailand, Heuglin's Gull is a regular visitor in small numbers of up to 20 birds (Round *et al.* 2009), and there are also a few records of Slaty-backed Gull *L. schistisagus*, Mongolian Gull and Lesser Black-backed Gull (N. Upton and P. Round pers. comm.) The nearest records of Heuglin's Gull *sensu stricto* are from Peninsular Malaysia (Anon. 2006), where it has also been recorded as a vagrant, and there is an unconfirmed record from Singapore of a Herring-type gull which may have been Heuglin's (Wells 1999). The nominate form of the rather similar (but darker-mantled) Lesser Black-backed Gull has been recorded as far south-east as the Cocos (Keeling) Islands (Olsen & Larsson 2003).

Description: A large gull of c.60 cm body length. Head white and unstreaked. Upperparts overall dark in appearance; primaries dark brown, and primary coverts and alula showing substantial white; scapulars, mantle, lesser coverts, median coverts and greater coverts dark grey. Underparts white (and unstreaked) on neck, chest, belly and vent. Tail all white above when viewed in flight. Legs light yellow; bill shortish, stout, extensive yellow on distal upper mandible and dark red and black on gonys, with a pale base. Difficult to judge primary moult score but an old primary five (p5) feather present.

The following possible confusion species in third-year plumage can be excluded: Slaty-backed Gull, ruled out at any age owing to the yellowish tone to the legs of the Wetar bird; Vega Gull *L. vegae*, which in its third year would show brown streaking on the head and nape; Mongolian Gull, which in its third winter shows paler grey rather than dark grey wings; and Caspian Gull *L. cachinnans* and Lesser Black-backed Gull, which would show a substantially darker mantle.

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Status of vultures in Mudumalai Tiger Reserve, Western Ghats, India

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India harbours nine species of vultures, and of these White-backed Vulture *Gyps bengalensis*, Indian Vulture *G. indicus* and Red-headed Vulture *Sarcogyps calvus* are classified by IUCN as Critically Endangered (BirdLife International 2008). Their sudden decline in the Indian subcontinent in the last decade was attributed to disease, poisoning and reduction in food availability, although diclofenac poisoning is now widely regarded as the principal cause in India (Prakash *et al.* 2003, Green *et al.* 2004, 2007, Shultz *et al.* 2004, Swan *et al.* 2006). Apart from their own threatened status, vultures are ecologically important in human-dominated areas, as scavengers at primitive slaughterhouses and carcass dumps (Satheesan 1989, Mundy *et al.* 1992), and in natural areas, as scavengers on animal carcasses of large mammals killed by carnivores (Houston 1974, Hunter *et al.* 2007, Majumder *et al.* 2009). As most of the studies on vultures have been restricted to the northern, western, eastern and central states of India (Prakash *et al.* 2003), baseline studies are needed in southern India to understand the status and dynamics of the populations there.